

The Truth About a Lexicographer

By CONSTANCE MURRAY GREENE

I CALLED at Funk & Wagnalls on the hottest afternoon of the hottest day ever recorded in New York, to see Dr. Frank Vizetelly, which was a dangerous thing to do. I approached the two little office boys, Seylla and Charybdis of all New York offices, in the properly cringing manner, and they consented to "go down and see" if he would admit me. After a long, warm wait they returned and led me through devious passages, like unto the new subway, where were books and books, piles of the *Literary Digest*, more books, and finally Dr. Vizetelly.

He says he is going to write a book on where lexicographers are put. I got the impression that he is so guarded in case of attack by the people who disapprove of the dictionaries that he and Funk & Wagnalls bring out ever and anon. I suggested this explanation, but it seems they get in anyway, New York labyrinths being as nothing to a Greek scholar who has threaded the paths to the Minotaur.

He's Something to All Men.

If you look Dr. Vizetelly up in *Who's Who*, you will see that he is an author, editor and lexicographer, and if you are clever you will know that this is a most pregnable combination. If he were only an author he wouldn't have time to be as pleasant as he is; if he were only an editor he wouldn't dare to be; and if he were only a lexicographer he couldn't be (with apologies to all other lexicographers). Being all three makes him a most delightful person to see, even when the temperature is wavering around 104.

Although he has edited more dictionaries and encyclopedias than any man living, he has done things more remarkable than that, and it makes him a little impatient with the rest of us sometimes.

"People tell me they can't do things because they don't know about them, haven't the facts to back them up. Do you suppose my mind retains one millionth part of the facts for which I am responsible? If it did I would be a raving maniac! To tell the truth, a person can do about anything he wants to if he studies hard enough and goes at it with enough confidence.

Norma, Where Art Thou?

"Years ago, just after I was married, I lost a position temporarily where I had every reason to think I would be retained. I was 'down and out,' as they say, and I couldn't wait until some one needed the kind of work I was accustomed to, so I decided to select the first thing my eye fell on. It happened to be writing fashions for a Chicago newspaper, but I did it! I supplied all the fashion notes, millinery and dress, for that paper under the name of 'Norma' for a long time."

It is not possible to appreciate the humor of this unless one has seen Dr. Vizetelly. He stands 6 feet in his socks, has a round, rich voice and looks remarkably like Buffalo Bill, only handsomer. Those women who followed the dictates of "Norma" would have sued the paper if they had seen her.

"Talking about one's work is much more interesting than talking about one's self," he says, "for the latter inevitably reminds one of the egotism of humanity. No man can work in the field of English lexicography for over thirty years without bubbling over on his subject." And he proceeded to do it thus:

Old Slang and New Spelling.

"I am constantly struck by the truth of the adage, 'There is nothing new under the sun.' Much of our modern slang, for instance, is to be found in Shakespeare, Pope, Dryden and other English classics. 'There's nobody at home' was a favorite



FRANK H. VIZETELLY

line with Pope. 'Believe me' is frequently found in Shakespeare and was current in the United States in Washington's time, for writing home he said, 'I heard the bullets whistle, and, believe me, there is something charming in the sound.'

"I am asked very often what my explanation is for the general difficulty in learning to spell correctly. The explanation is that English spelling is bereft of all reason—that we need a new alphabet. That 'priceless inheritance' of ours, as it is so often called, has too much to do with only twenty-six letters to indicate forty sounds. But we won't have a new one until the phoneticist can be induced to forget his symbols, the lexicographer a few of his dots and dashes and the simplifier his schemes for simplification. If they would act jointly with a few practical typographers and men with journalistic sense we might soon have an alphabet that would win public favor." And when you consider that this is the opinion of a king among Simplified Spellers, it has double weight.

That Dr. Vizetelly is a humorist in ad-

dition to being all these other things one knows from the illustrations which he uses in his *Desk Book of 25,000 Words Frequently Mispronounced* and in *The Preparation of Manuscript for the Printer*. They are all given with a double purpose, not only to illustrate his point of view but also to show something of what was passing through his mind at the time he made the book, and they are delightful proofs that a true humorist can worm humor into the most unexpected places.

He Will Spell the Germans Down!

I asked when the war would end, as every one does every one else, and got the usual noncommittal answer. But if it doesn't end soon there is grave danger that Dr. Vizetelly will go. When he went to Canada last fall he found his sixteen-year-old nephew, the last of seven, just about to enlist. So he brought him back to New York, where he keeps him fast at work in his office, and he says that if another member of his family goes he will be that member. We all know what boys of 16 are, and so it may be only a question of days. And after all, why not? Chester-

ton is going to war and now nothing seems out of the way.

"Well, if you won't tell me when the war is going to end, perhaps you will say what its effect has been on the English vocabulary," I suggested, and this time I was more successful.

A War of Words.

"The effect has been material," Dr. Vizetelly said. "The boys at the front have appropriated a great many words from the French and have given us a good round number of their own. Among the latter are: ace, Anzac, barndook, pill-box, Blighty, blimp, camouflage, cootie, grouser, poilu, slacker and tank."

"Poilu is being commonly misused for a French soldier instead of for one who has seen service in the trenches. The popular name for the French soldier is pioupiou."

"From a rough approximation I judge that we have derived from all branches of the service during the war several thousand words, five or six perhaps, which will have to be inserted in new dictionaries, exclusive of the personal and geographical names that have come into prominence during the military operations."

Tales by Arthur Train

ARTHUR TRAIN'S stories in his new volume, *Mortmain*, are not particularly convincing. The plots are fairly well constructed, but the action seems mechanical rather than real, and the characters lack verisimilitude. The stories are technically well done, with a care for situation, character study and setting; but the result fails to thrill the reader. These are pleasant, clean and readable tales, but not memorable.

The title story, *Mortmain* (*The Dead Hand*), is too long properly to be called a short story, and has the further weakness of being a dream narrative. The modern reader objects to this hackneyed and unresourceful method of solving complications. In spite of its defects, however, the story—or novelette, as it should be called—has interest of situation and of character. Mr. Train has worked up a dramatic intensity of incident that deserved a better denouement than mere awakening from a nightmare. He might have made a narrative of genuine power if he had developed it as fact or made it a study in the scientific supernaturalism

that is a special feature of our present day fiction.

The Rescue of Theophilus Newbegin is an entertaining tale of missionaries and young lovers in China, with a native rebellion to lend suspense to the action. The characters are more lifelike than those in the other stories—the young Ensign in charge of his first vessel, the missionary and his wife, faithful to their work among the heathens and willing to die rather than desert their station, and the young girl who has never known youth's pleasures. The setting is colorful and the action of the story briskly dramatic.

The Man Hunt, also a novelette rather than a short story, is fairly interesting as showing various sides of New York life, but as fiction is not impressive. The other stories in the volume are of rather slight importance. Some of them are mere character sketches, with no developed plot, as *The Vagabond*, *A Study in Sociology* and *The Little Feller*, while *Randolph*, '64, is a stiff, artificial story, with the scene laid in Harvard.

MORTMAIN. By ARTHUR TRAIN. Charles Scribner's Sons. \$1.50.

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